

Ships of the United States Navy

Christening, Launching and Commissioning

Second Edition



Naval History Division
Department of the Navy
Washington, D.C., 1975

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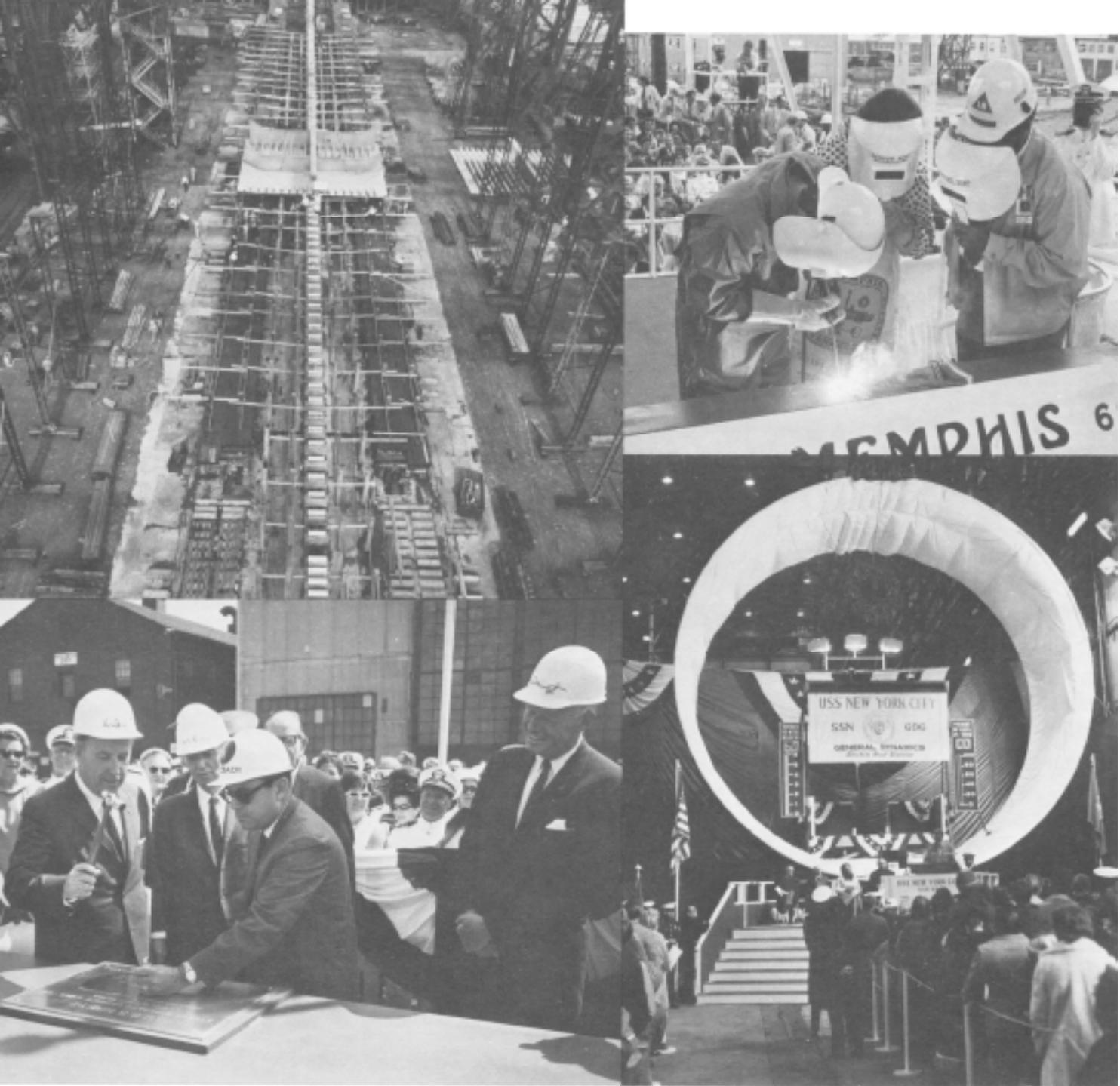
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prepared by
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Keel Laying

(Clockwise from upper left) The first hull assembly of Wichita (AOR-1) rests on the building ways; the keel of Memphis (SSN-691) is authenticated with a welder's torch; the first hull ring of a nuclear submarine is ready for laying in place; and the keel of Nimitz (CVAN-68) is authenticated with a hammer and steel punch.

Foreword

Christening, launching, and commissioning are bench marks of abiding importance in the history of a United States Navy ship. One sees in these closely related events a striking parallel to the human experience of those Americans, young and not so young, who man the ships for our nation's defense on the oceans of the world. If launching may be likened to birth, and christening the endowment of individuality, then at commissioning the ship is at the threshold of a productive and rewarding maturity.

Ancient seafaring peoples, rimming the Mediterranean, launched their ships with rituals having religious overtones. These practices, varying in form as nations and cultures evolved through the centuries, have carried over to the present christening and launching ceremonies. In contrast, formal commissioning ceremonies for new ships would seem to be of more recent origin.

This small publication supersedes one, now out of print, prepared under the direction of my able predecessor, Rear Admiral E. M. Eller. It presents a brief resume of the historical background and significance of christening, launching, and commissioning. Hopefully, it will prove both informative and interesting to a wide audience including the sponsors, the shipbuilders, and the officers and men of the United States Navy.

E. B. HOOPER
Vice Admiral, USN (Ret)
Director of Naval History



Mrs. Gerald Ford christens the nuclear submarine Dace (SSN-607), 18 August 1962.

CHRISTENING AND LAUNCHING

“In the name of the United States I christen thee _____,” proclaims the sponsor while she shatters the ceremonial bottle of champagne against the gleaming bow of a new ship towering above her. As if the sponsor’s very words have injected a spark of life, the ship begins to move slowly from the security of the building way to the water environment where she will play her destined role for the defense of the United States. It is uniquely fitting that this dramatic moment during the launching of a naval vessel be placed in the hands of a woman.

When a woman accepts the Secretary of the Navy’s invitation to sponsor a new ship, she has agreed to stand as the central figure in an event with a heritage reaching backward into the dim recesses of recorded history. Just as the passage of years has witnessed momentous changes in

ships, so also has the christening-launching ceremonial form we know today evolved from earlier practices. Nevertheless, the tradition, meaning, and spiritual overtones remain ever constant.

The vastness, power, and unpredictability of the sea must certainly have awed the first sailors to venture far from shore. Instinctively, they would seek divine protection for themselves and their craft. A Babylonian narrative dating from the third millenium B.C., describes the completion of a ship:

Openings to the water I stopped;

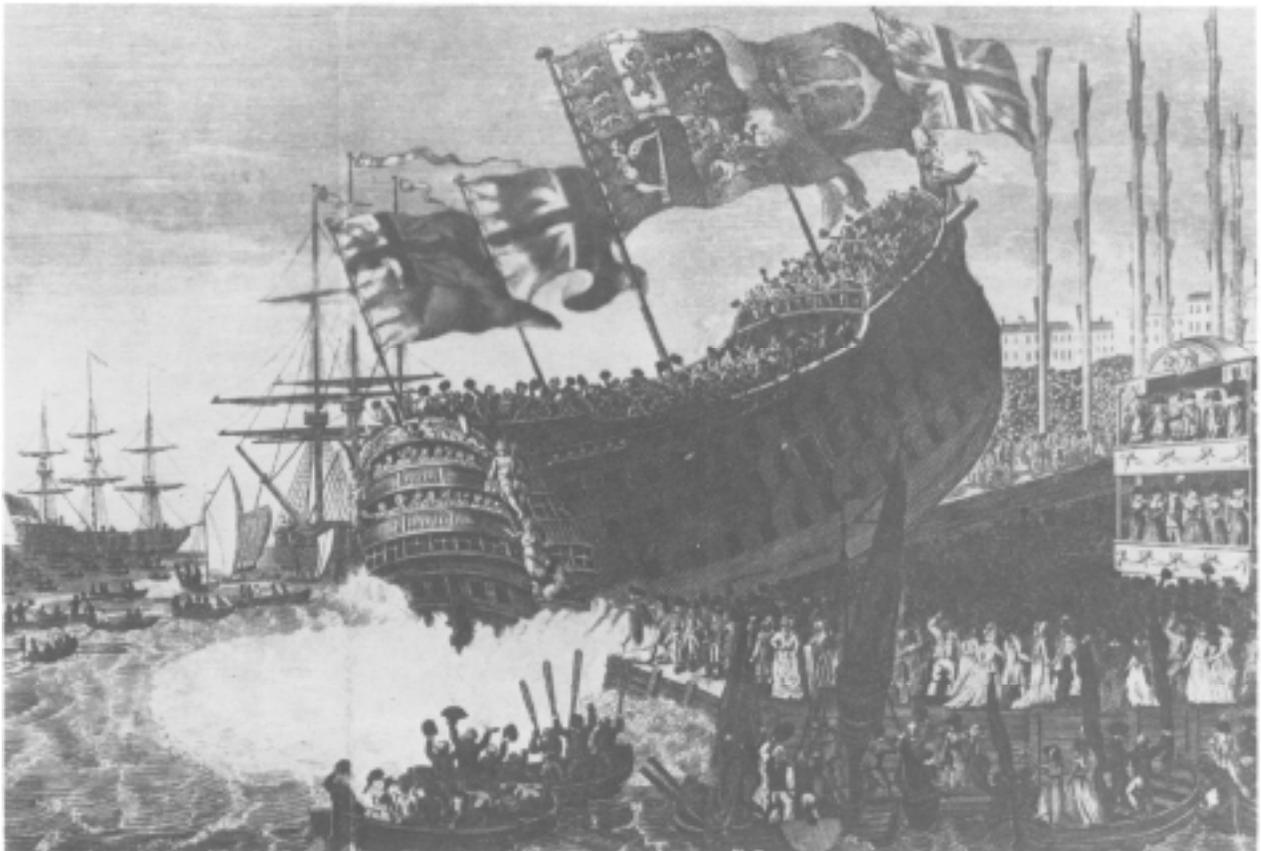
I searched for cracks and the wanting parts

I fixed:

Three sari of bitumen I poured over the
outside;

To the gods I caused oxen to be sacrificed.

Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans called on their gods to protect seamen. The favor of the



British ship-of-the-line Prince of Wales slides into the water in 1794.

monarch of the seas-Poseidon in Greek mythology, the Roman Neptune-was evoked. Ship launching participants in ancient Greece wreathed their heads with olive branches, drank wine to honor the gods, and poured water on the new vessel as a symbol of blessing. Shrines were carried on board Greek and Roman ships, and this practice extended into the Middle Ages. The shrine was usually placed at the quarter-deck; on a modern United States Navy ship, the quarterdeck area still has a special ceremonial significance.

Different peoples and cultures shaped the religious ceremonies surrounding a ship launching. Jews and Christians alike customarily used wine and water as they called upon God to safeguard them at sea. Intercession of the saints and the blessing of the church were asked by Christians. Ship launchings in the Ottoman Empire were accompanied by prayers to Allah, the sacrifice of sheep, and appropriate feasting. The Vikings are said to have offered human sacrifice to appease the angry gods of the northern seas.

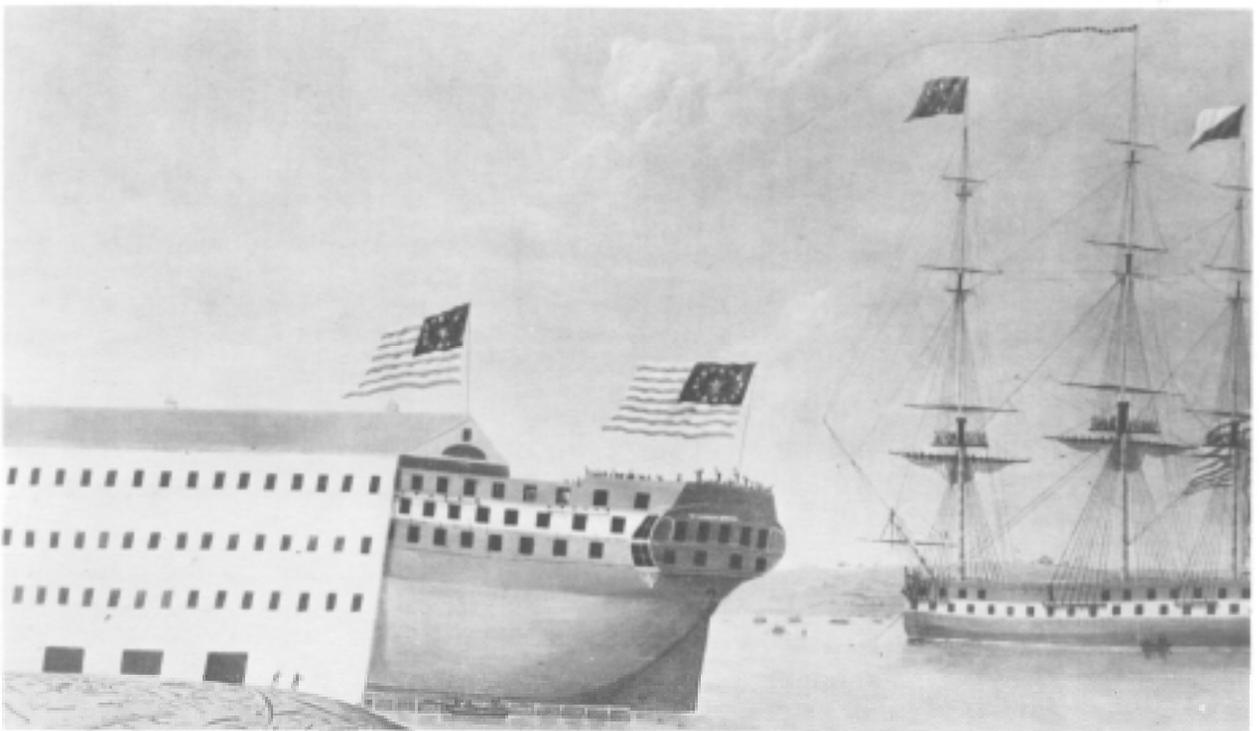
Chaplain Henry Teonge of Britain's Royal

Navy left an interesting account of a warship launch, a "briganteen of 23 oars," by the Knights of Malta in 1675:

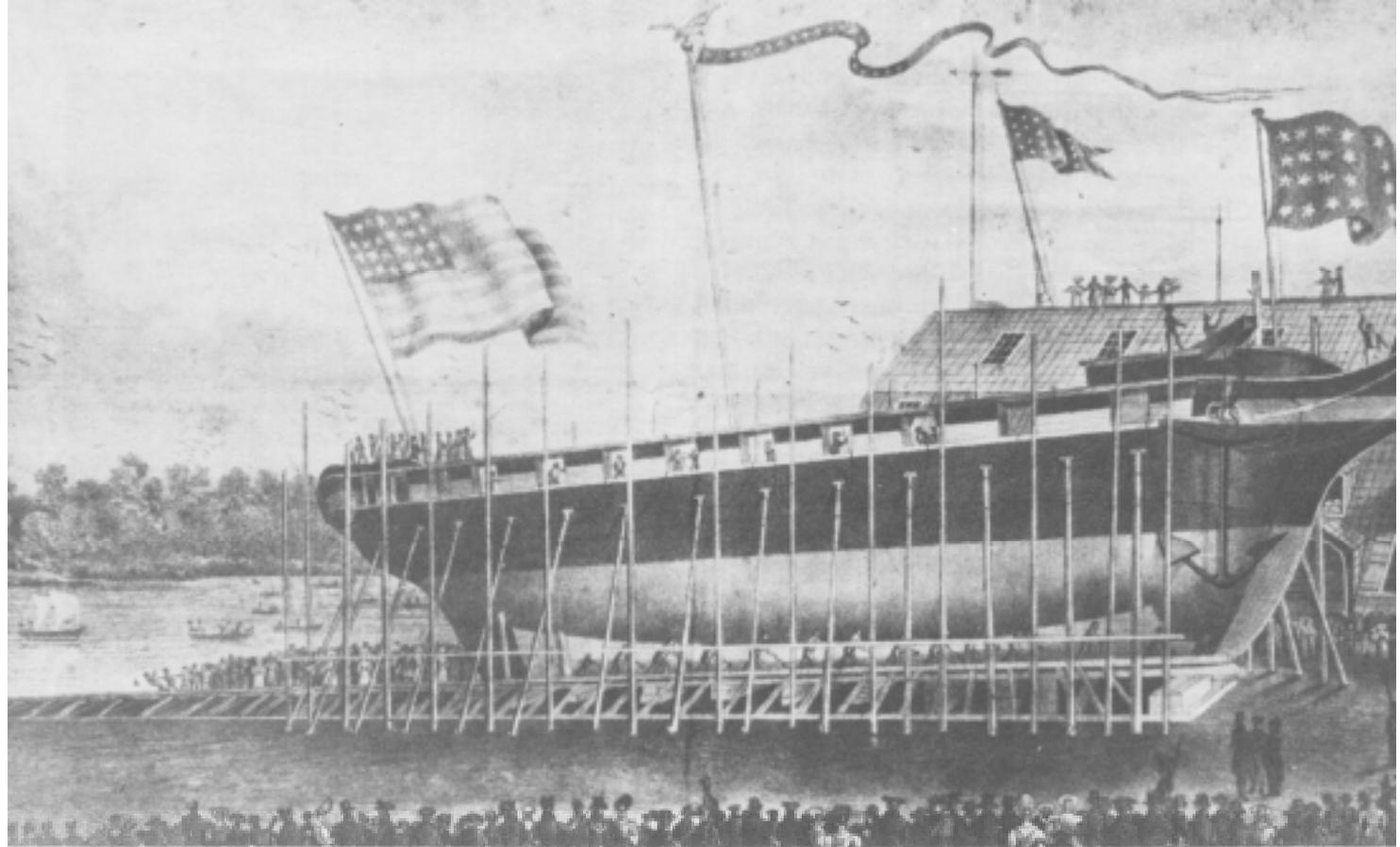
Two fryers and an attendant went into the vessel, and kneeling down prayed halfe an houre, and layd their hands on every mast, and other places of the vessel, and sprinkled her all over with holy water. Then they came out and hoysted a pendent to signify she was a man of war; then at once thrust her into the water.

While the liturgical aspects of ship christenings continued in Catholic countries, the Reformation seems, for a time, to have put a stop to them in Protestant Europe. By the seventeenth century, for example, English launchings were secular affairs. The christening party for the launch of the 64 gun ship-of-the-line *Prince Royal* in 1610 included the Prince of Wales and famed naval constructor Phineas Pett, who was master shipwright at the Woolwich yard. Pett described the proceedings:

The noble Prince ... accompanied with the Lord Admiral and the great lords, were



The launch of ship-of-the-line Washington from a covered shipway at Portsmouth Navy Yard on 1 October 1814 is shown in this print, by an unknown artist.



Sloop-of-war John Adams awaits her christening at Norfolk, 16 November 1830.

on the poop, where the standing great gilt cup was ready filled with wine to name the ship so soon as she had been afloat, according to ancient custom and ceremony performed at such times, and heaving the standing cup overboard. His Highness then standing upon the poop with a selected company only, besides the trumpeters, with a great deal of expression of princely joy, and with the ceremony of drinking in the standing cup, threw all the wine forwards towards the half-deck, and solemnly calling her by name of the *Prince Royal*, the trumpets sounding the while, with many gracious words to me, gave the standing cup into my hands.

The “standing cup” was a large loving cup fashioned of precious metal. When the ship began to slide down the ways, the presiding official took a ceremonial sip of wine from the cup, and poured the rest on the deck or over the

bow. Usually the cup was thrown overboard and belonged to the lucky retriever. As navies grew larger and launchings more frequent, economy dictated that the costly cup be caught in a net for reuse at other launchings. Late in seventeenth-century Britain, the “standing cup” ceremony was replaced by the practice of breaking a bottle across the bow.

Sponsors of English warships were customarily members of the royal family, senior naval officers, or Admiralty officials. A few civilians were invited to sponsor Royal Navy ships during the nineteenth century, and women became sponsors for the first time. In 1875, a religious element was returned to naval christenings by Princess Alexandra, wife of the Prince of Wales, when she introduced an Anglican choral service in the launching ceremony for battleship *Alexandra*. The usage continues with the singing of Psalm 107 with its special meaning to mariners:

They that go down to the sea in ships;
That do business in great waters;
These see the works of the Lord, and His
wonders in the deep.

French ship launchings and christenings in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were accompanied by unique rites closely resembling marriage and baptismal ceremonies. A godfather for the new ship presented a godmother with a bouquet of flowers as both said the ship's name. No bottle was broken, but a priest pronounced the vessel named and blessed it with holy water.

American ceremonial practices for christening and launching quite naturally had their roots in Europe. Descriptions of launching Revolutionary War naval vessels are not plentiful, but a local newspaper detailed the launch of Continental frigate *Raleigh* at Portsmouth, New Hampshire, in May 1776:

On Tuesday the 21st inst. the Continental Frigate of thirty-two guns, built at this place, ... was Launched amidst the acclamation of many thousand spectators. She is esteemed by all those who are judges that have seen her, to be one of the compleatest ships ever built in America. The unwearied diligence and care of the three Master-Builders ... and the good order and industry of the Carpenters, deserve particular notice; scarcely a single instance of a person's being in liquor, or any difference among the men in the yard during the time of her building, every man with pleasure exerting himself to the utmost: and altho' the greatest care was taken that only the best of timber was used, and the work perform'd in a most masterly manner, the whole time from her raising to the day she launched did not exceed sixty working days, and what afforded a most pleasing view (which was manifest in the countenances of the Spectators) this noble fabrick was compleatly to her anchors in the main channel, in less than six minutes from the time she run, without the least hurt; and what is truly remarkable, not a single person met with the least accident in launching, tho' near five hundred men were



A Navy ship may occasionally have more than one sponsor. Two granddaughters of Admiral Albert Gleaves christened destroyer Gleaves (DD-423) on 9 December 1939.

employed in and about her when run off.

It was customary for the builders to celebrate a ship launching. Rhode Island authorities, charged with overseeing construction of frigates *Warren* and *Providence*, voted the sum of fifty dollars to the master builder of each yard "to be expended in providing an entertainment for the carpenters that worked on the ships." Five pounds was spent for lime juice for the launching festivities of frigate at Philadelphia, suggesting that the "entertainment" included a potent punch with lime juice as an ingredient.

No mention of christening a Continental Navy ship during the American Revolution has come to light. The first ships of the Continental Navy, *Alfred*, *Cabot*, *Andrew Doria*, and *Columbus*, were former merchantmen and their names were assigned during conversion and outfitting. Later, when Congress authorized the construction of thirteen frigates, no names were assigned until after four had launched.

The first description we have of an American warship christening is that of *Constitution*, famous "Old Ironsides," at Boston, 21 October 1797. Her sponsor, Captain James Sever, USN, stood on the weather deck at the bow. "At fifteen minutes after twelve she commenced a movement into the water with such steadiness, majesty and exactness as to fill every heart with